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## On Office

Matilda Aslizadeh, *Office, Skol, Montreal*. 7 octobre - 5 novembre 2005

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## ACTUALITÉS/EXPOSITIONS

### Montreal ON OFFICE

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Matilda Aslizadeh's video projection, *Office*, is a slippery mix of forms : part narrative film; part projected "picture that moves," à la Gillian Wearing or Sam Taylor-Wood; part succession of still, fractured images. It is also a totally engaging and satisfying artwork. I think its success as art – its aesthetic success, or in other words, the sense of visual and intellectual pleasure obtained from watching it – is directly proportional to the ways in which Aslizadeh deliberately mixes and hybridizes narrative and pictorial structures, blending them until any sense of being comfortably rooted in a conventional point of view is inverted, turned inside out like a glove.

Disassembling structures does not mean relativizing their components. Aslizadeh is not interested in deconstructing narrative or point of view per se, however much her subject – the repressed inner lives of the workers and managers at a fictitious American insurance company's head office – seems to cry out for such an approach. *Office* succeeds because Aslizadeh repeatedly shifts the ways in which her narrative is told. She thereby implies compositional parallels between her video's formal (pictorial and durational) structure and the broken, fractured and necessarily incomplete narratives her characters tell themselves and each other. In this respect, her shifts of compositional and stylistic tones are not arbitrary, relative or postmodern, but are deliberately tied to her characters' psychological states. Aslizadeh's stylistic shifts are expressive of her protagonists' conflicted and fragmented inner lives, an ostensibly stylistic avant-gardism – what Aslizadeh calls "a visual language that

owes much to the avant-garde traditions of distancing and radical breaks" – employed in the service of greater psychological realism.

*Office's* 23-minute narrative traces the lives of a group of office workers and managers at Western Life, a fictitious American insurance company. While the company managers plot strategy and deliver speeches with content that seems largely derived from Jack Welch-style managerial how-to handbooks, the white-collar workers argue, gossip and flirt with one another in between browbeating and cajoling clients into buying insurance packages they seem to have no real need for. Most of the action takes place in around the offices, halls and courtyard of the Western Life head office – a geometrically precise cube of metal and glass surrounded by a lushly landscaped southern California garden. Nature is visible everywhere in Western Life's offices : lush-leaved trees, bright flowers, pools and waterfalls along an exterior terrace, palm trees, the dappled patterns made by the Californian sunlight falling through wind-stirred leaves. The natural imagery's sense of organic integration – the way it brackets and contains the pictorially and psychologically fractured set pieces that unfold within the Western Life building's rooms and hallways – implies that the office is a microcosm out of step with a larger world. Office life's physical isolation from the integrated imagery and symbolism Aslizadeh associates with nature generates a corresponding psychological, or psychic, isolation among those who work, and scheme, there.

Aslizadeh increases the Western Life offices' physical isolation by repeatedly fracturing and dividing her projection's image plane. Sometimes two or three



different narratives simultaneously unfold on the same screen, and while the characters appear to be in close physical proximity to one another, they are actually further apart than they seem on screen – a point emphasized when they walk or reach in or out of one space, disappear for a while, then reappear, thereby calling attention to an implied, but visually unrepresented, space between two or more narratives. As Aslizadeh observes in her director's notes, "[such elements] declare that the world is transitory and arbitrarily organized." At other times, these visual fractures present the same event from two or more points of view. For example, when an energetic but rhetorically challenged executive makes a strategic pitch to a circle of colleagues, Aslizadeh depicts the executive's and his colleagues' respective viewpoints on the same screen, so that as we study his nervous,

of man and nature. According to Adorno, it is the characteristic of the nonorganic work using the principle of montage that it no longer creates the semblance (*Schein*) of reconciliation." Thus, for Adorno, "the avant-gardist work is the only possible authentic expression of the contemporary state of the world." Lukacs, on the other hand, "holds onto the organic work of art ('realistic' in his terminology) as an aesthetic norm and from that perspective rejects avant-gardist works as decadent."

Throughout *Office*, Aslizadeh depicts nature as organically unified, and western life as pervasively alienating. Yet the circumstances that prevent the reunification of nature and western culture are also those which, as Adorno foresaw, underwrite and guarantee the authenticity and aesthetic force of a project such as Aslizadeh's, whose pictorial and narrative disinte-



energetic and verbally leaden performance, we also observe his colleagues' bored, unimpressed and vaguely hostile assessment of his pitch.

In a sense, Aslizadeh's repeated fracturing and disintegration of the screen image is a metaphor for the psychological disintegration of her film's characters. Aslizadeh implies that the conditions responsible for this disintegration are pervasive and pernicious, and that they infect not only her fictitious workers, but all of western life.

Aslizadeh's thinking connects to a larger debate within western aesthetics that historian Peter Burger illustrates with reference to the work of philosophers Georg Lukacs and Theodor Adorno. Burger argues that Lukacs and Adorno disagreed about the significance of the avant-garde's dismantling of the principle of the organic unity of works of art. In Burger's words, "[t]he man-made work of art that pretends to be like nature projects an image of the reconciliation

gration thereby allegorizes the real social conditions underpinning its creation. In this respect, *Office* is a project that, while it does not abide by the norms of narrative and pictorial unity typically associated with realist art, is nonetheless a form of critical realism, an authentically "post-avant-gardist" art that employs avant-gardist strategies reflexively, in the service of a searching critique of the culture it emerged from.

CHRISTOPHER BRAYSHAW

